

In Conversation with Susan Holtz

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As we approach the cusp of the next millennium, the challenges of sustainable global development looms large in its complexity and breadth. Efforts are being made around the world to address these challenges by integrating environmental, social, and economic policies.

The Canadian government signalled its commitment to the Agenda 21 action plan, developed by the United Nation's Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, by designating the International Development Research Centre an Agenda 21 organization. In response to Chapter 8 of Agenda 21, "Integrating environment and development in decision making," IDRC undertook to research and document the practical, policy integration problems encountered in its development work.

The Cornerstone of Development: Integrating Environmental, Social, and Economic Policies, co-edited with Jamie Schnurr, is the result of that research. IDRC interviewed [Susan Holtz](#), one of the book's editors, to discuss some issues raised in *The Cornerstone of Development*, including:

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In the pursuit of sustainable development, what new efforts or progress have been made in integrating environmental, social, and economic policies in the last decade?

I would say that almost all the practical, on-the-ground progress that is understood as policy integration has occurred in the last 10 or 12 years. There were some earlier efforts, for instance, the "Wise Use" movement in North America in the first half of this century whose aims were to conserve resources such as agricultural topsoil and forests for economic and environmental reasons. However, public discourse on integrating just environmental and economic goals only really began in the 1970s, for example the often-heated debate on the Club of Rome's "Limits to Growth" models, which attempted to assess the environmental and resource implications of continuing economic and population growth. It was not until the Brundtland Report of 1987, which emphasized sustainable development, that there were very many initiatives that explicitly attempted to integrate social, economic, and environmental goals. It should be remembered that one of the main barriers to sustainable development identified in the Brundtland Report is that, in both the public and private sectors, social, economic, and environmental policies typically are developed by separate organizations or departments. Such compartmentalization is still the norm in most present-day societies, and real changes in this pattern even now are quite unusual.

Does Canada have anything to teach or relate about lowering of institutional barriers to policy integration?

Canada has played a leading role in the institutional development of sustainable development thinking, starting with its strong financial and moral support of the Brundtland Commission and continuing with the Canadian contribution of policy round tables for sustainable development at all levels of governance, from local to national. Each round table is comprised of stakeholders from many backgrounds, including politicians and senior bureaucrats, NGOs, labour, the private sector, and academics. Canada's most recent federal initiative is the appointment of a Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development, attached to the office of the Auditor General, to whom each federal government department is required to submit its sustainable development plan, which must be updated every three years. The Commissioner reports publicly on the coverage of policy goals and the implementation strategy of these departmental plans. The first set of these plans were submitted in December 1997, and in 1998 the Commissioner produced his first substantive report, which also included chapters on topics related to sustainable development progress. In the private sector, a number of Canadian companies have embraced the concept of sustainable development. One of the most important innovations, where some Canadian companies have shown leadership, is in developing regular public reporting on environmental performance in the context of sustainable development. The significance of public reporting is that in order to report in a meaningful way, it's necessary to clarify exactly what you're trying to achieve. This is an essential first step in trying to integrate policy goals.

Leading from that first step are many different ways to approach integrating policy in the pursuit of sustainable development. Is there a single best approach in your opinion?

I think there are three main ways to think about policy integration in this context. First, it can be thought of simply as a series of pragmatic efforts to elevate social, environmental, or economic goals to equal prominence in a policy context, which is usually focused on only one or two of those areas. Often, this means trying to bring environmental and social dimensions into such matters as the national budget or international trade. It can also mean insisting that the economic or social costs of proposed environmental initiatives will be taken as seriously as the hoped-for environmental benefits. A number of case studies in *The Cornerstone of Development* address such a down-to-earth approach.

A second approach ignores substantive questions and instead focuses on process, specifically the characteristics and mechanisms of decision making that allow the full spectrum of relevant interests and values to be brought into the process and to effectively participate. This process-oriented approach concentrates on how the integration of different people's perspectives actually happens.

Finally, a third and more intellectual approach to policy integration focuses on the substantive analysis of tensions or conflicts between environmental, social, and economic policy goals and on solutions that can (or cannot) reconcile them. There are thoughtful articles in the book on both of these two latter approaches.

All these different emphases contribute important perspectives; none is "best". However, there certainly are better and worse or, more accurately, more and less successful efforts within any one of these approaches. Many case studies in the book give examples. At the pragmatic level, many efforts at institutional change simply don't work very well; often the effort is eventually abandoned. My own pet peeve concerns deficiencies in the analytic approach, specifically the analysis of basic policy goals. I believe that there has been too little progress in our understanding of what it would really mean to reconcile idealistic social, political, and ecological goals with what human beings apparently actually want in the way of economic growth, automobiles, and material possessions.

The difficulties around policy integration seem to beg for new institutions and processes, if not a new cultural and social way of being. What realistic expectations can we have for consensus among stakeholders, and consequent integrated action on sustainable development, with the institutions and processes we have now?

First of all, I don't think better integration of policy goals or more inclusive decision-making processes require any more political consensus than we now have. The core values of sustainable development, namely the vital and equal importance of both human well-being and of the ecosystems that sustain us, are widely shared in Canada and around the world.

And on the lowest levels of policy, at the community level?

At the level of specific decisions involving trade-offs and choices, opinions vary enormously. So what else is new? Everyone is certainly not going to be happy with every decision, but the important thing is that few will seriously question the value of a policy dialogue that gives significant weight to the social, economic and environmental implications of decisions. In many ways, putting this into practice at the local level is both easier and harder than in larger jurisdictions. Easier because people can argue and reason directly together -- and harder -- for the same reason. It's simply the nature of the local level. People know each other personally, for better and for ill. One advantage is that people have lines of communication and information other than the mass media, which tend to simplify issues and which make it particularly difficult to do justice to the complexity inherent in the concept of sustainable development.

Global economic and political integration is now proceeding at breakneck speed. Will we need new global institutions and a new kind of democracy and/or transparency of process that will allow us to deal with those complexities?

At the global level, I have no doubt at all that institutions will continue to evolve and change. This is happening now in response to greater global economic integration coupled with rapidly changing technologies, especially in communication. But it has happened throughout recorded history: institutions develop as they are needed (or, more accurately, they lag somewhat behind the need). Because it is clear that greater global economic integration requires institutional development, this will happen. What is not clear is the degree to which the environmental and social values implied in sustainable development are strongly enough supported by those tinkering with and inventing new institutional arrangements to actually want to make integration easier. A case in point is the World Trade Organization (WTO). Although originally conceived as one of the Bretton Woods institutions, it has only recently been organized as it was first intended. Despite the fact that it has arrived on the scene well after the Brundtland Commission's report, it is perhaps the most single-minded of the global economic institutions in its pursuit of a narrow economic goal (trade liberalization) using decision processes that are highly restrictive concerning participation. I think that this reflects the very conservative culture of legal experts in international trade, though this can be contrasted with the tentative steps towards sustainable development thinking that are beginning to be seen in the political culture of WTO's member states. But, if determined member states wish to broaden WTO's policy culture, change is possible.

Stepping back from the rather conceptual emphasis of "policy integration", the reality is that making significant on-the-ground progress toward sustainable development globally is an almost unimaginably huge challenge. Minimally, it means the near-eradication of war, the halting of significant environmental deterioration, and a major reduction in poverty and political oppression, including ethnic and gender oppression. Desirable as these things are, it is not obvious to me that achieving all these goals together as a package, so to speak, is possible and consistent with democratic values. That is the real policy integration challenge. It is clear that these goals will not

be achieved by institutional change alone, although institutional change will play an important role. But as overwhelming as the challenge is, it is still possible to identify some positive steps that are being taken in all of these areas. And perhaps that is as far as anyone can see with certainty.

Susan Holtz is a private consultant and Adjunct Professor in the Environmental Planning Department of the Nova Scotia College for Art and Design. As a consultant, Ms. Holtz specializes in energy, environment, and sustainable development policy, and works on related issues as a mediator and facilitator. She was founding Vice Chair of Canada's National, and Nova Scotia's, Round Table on the Environment and the Economy; a member of the Auditor General of Canada's Panel of Senior Advisors; and has served on the Canadian Environmental Advisory Council and the Canadian Environmental Assessment Research Council.

The Book

The Cornerstone of Development: Integrating Environmental, Social, and Economic Policies, edited by Jamie Schnurr and Susan Holtz. [Ordering information.](#)